

TWO SHORT STORIES

By

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THE BROKEN AXLE

James C. Burke

December 20, 1856. The locomotive Governor Whitfield had been in service on the Central Rail Road for three years. Built in the 2-2-0 configuration, it was lavishly ornamented with brass and its trim was painted green, red, and gold. Perhaps the fastest engine on the line, it frequently pulled the express running from Wayne City Junction to the northern terminus of the line at Orchard Depot, a distance of one hundred and eighty-five miles. In every respect, the locomotive performed admirably during its service, in large part due to the rigorous maintenance routine of the railroad machine shops. Even so, there was a problem with the locomotive's tender – a flaw verging on being imperceptible – that under the right situation, would result in a catastrophic outcome.

The rear truck of the tender had a hairline crack in its axle. When it was cast, the weakness was present; and over the years, the stress of loading the tender with wood and water had caused the crack to lengthen. Now, it was a few trips away from splitting asunder. When it happened, it did so thusly: the larger section of the axle fell, and was dragged along the crossties – eventually, embedding into one – lifting the truck off the rails; the short end flipped up, causing the wheel to twist out of the bracket on the truck. The rear truck of the tender derailed. The cars followed, and the tracks tore loose from the crossties. The critical variables in this fearful equation were the location where it happened, and how fast the train was going when the axle failed. Actually, it happened on a long stretch of trestlework not far from Orchard... or did it? A certain thirteen-year-old girl name Parthenia Margaret Poisson, a victim of the crash, was trying to assemble allies across time to prevent the accident from happening – this, while she was freezing to death.

The few that answered her call included a certain physician from Georgia named Dr. Preston J. Wallace, and her twin sister, Genevieve Elizabeth Poisson Wallace – the former and married the latter. Then, there was the Parthenia counterpart at age

thirty-nine. She was a strange woman who had an imaginary friend, and penned curious stories. Obviously, in some version of the world she didn't die. Nevertheless, this sweet, genteel, Southern lady was subject to her own company perpetually, a condition her family deemed appropriate for perpetual supervision. Thirteen-year-old Parthenia, in her fleeting moments of consciousness, found Genevieve less receptive to her pleas for help. She feared, know her sister had gone mad, that she was fated to follow the same course. She dared not tell a soul that her sister could speak to her without saying a word. Curiously, the Parthenia that died in her world in 1856 did not have a twin sister.

Dr. Preston Wallace was a somewhat problematic player in this cross-universal conundrum. He met Genevieve in 1869, and was killed in a different train wreck on September 27, 1873 – that is, in most of the relevant versions of the world. This Genevieve did not have a twin, but she had an imaginary friend named Parthenia that agitated his wife to no end; yet, he graciously tolerated the second unseen woman in his marriage. The young Parthenia knew that her friends of the future were destined to die violent deaths; and they, in no conceivable way could help her. Even so, she could help them. Her mind, however, had reached a stranger that she believed to be nearby in her own time – that was her hope. The stranger was of her world, but not quite synchronized with her time.

December 22, 1882. Not long after Parthenia and Genevieve had settled into their seats on the cars, Parthenia said to her elderly uncle, Phesanton Clark, and his secretary, Mr. Guyton,

“Gentlemen, would you like to hear a story?” Uncle Phesanton replied,

“Yes, we would, Parthenia.” Nervously, Genevieve asked,

“Is it one of your stories, dear?” She answered with a devious smile,

“Oh, yes... Last night, I thought it up especially for our trip.”

“Let's hear your story, Miss Poisson,” said Mr. Guyton. Parthenia opened her journal, then began to read.

“The train had derailed five miles beyond a station stop after dark. Most of the cars had turned over. The express agent was hurt severely, and they thought he would die at any minute. Others were hurt too, and it was very cold. She remembered following a boy down the track. He thought it was only a few miles back to the station, but it was longer. The boy took a lantern - he didn't even ask anybody to come with him. It was all his idea. The lamp went out because there wasn't enough oil in it. In his excitement, he did not bother to check. She lost him, and then wandered into the woods. It was hopeless! Nobody heard her calls. Trudging in deep snow

drifts, her feet and legs froze. The wind on her face felt as though she was being cut with shards of glass. Tears froze on her cheeks. Finally, in a delirium, unconsciousness prevailed. What caused her to follow him?" Wondering whether there was some hint of truth hidden in her story, Genevieve interjected,

"When does the story take place, dear?"

"It happened before the war. Can I continue?"

"Please do, Parthenia."

"Dr. Wallace, after twenty years of practice, could not purge from his thoughts the horrors of the night of the train wreck." Genevieve whispered to Parthenia,

"You don't mean Preston?" As if she had not heard, Parthenia continued reading without pause.

"In his Savannah hotel room, he anticipated revisiting it again, the next morning, when he met with the retire superintendent of the Central Railroad, Thomas Alexander. The locomotive tipped over when it left the track; cars followed rolling over down the embankment, which was at least thirty feet. The brakemen were thrown, or jumped, from the cars. One was crushed under a passenger car, presumably dying instantly. The others suffered broken bones and gashes, but none of their injuries were mortal. The mail and baggage cars turned over upside down upon the engine and tender and soon were on fire. The men in these cars perished amid the flames before anything could be done to save them. The passenger cars, all being made of wood in those days, were soon in danger of catching fire as well. Fortunately, the number of passengers traveling in the mail train that night was small, eleven in all, eight men and three women. Of these, four men and two women escaped bruised and shaken. They gave aid to those who couldn't reach safety on their own. One man, dashed about when the car overturned, suffered a broken skull and was brought out dead. The conductor broke his collar bone and forearm, but only needed slight assistance, freeing himself from the collapsed shell of the passenger car. A young woman in the same car, frightened and in terrible pain, was buried up to the shoulders under the crushing weight of the debris, the lower portion of her body was pinned beneath the platform of the car. It was as if her body was held in a vise. For nearly half an hour, all who could help worked to free her as the fire advanced through the other cars. Finally, using a beam as a lever, she was pulled free in a single movement. Tragically, she only lived long enough to hold out her hand to the closest of those that freed her, that being Dr. Wallace." Once again, Genevieve interrupted her reading.

"Did my husband tell you that story?"

“No, sister, it hasn’t happened yet. You are still here!” The gentlemen were dumbstruck. They looked at Genevieve curiously, and then Mr. Guyton asked her to continue. She smiled, then picked up where she left off.

“The engineer had burns on his legs, painful, but not life threatening. The fireman had his right leg gashed above the knee deep enough to see the bone. He stopped the bleeding himself with his belt and a rag. A man, one of the passengers, who had joined in the futile effort to save the trapped woman, had a crushed foot. It was only minutes after she expired, did he stumble to the ground in pain. Pulled to safety also was a badly cut man with a piece of metal rod projecting from his skull. He was conscious, but too weak to move. Dr. Wallace did not expect him to live much longer, and asked the less injured if one of them would like to stay with him knowing he might die soon. A lady named Lucinda volunteered, saying it would be un-Christian to let him die alone in the cold, sat down beside him. With all at a safe distance from the burning cars, a young man and his lady friend – her name was Parthenia – told the injured passengers that they would go for help. The conductor told him to look for a box with several lanterns located near the rear of the last car, and to detach the red lantern that he could see was still intact. The young man retrieved both even as the fire had started work on the front of the car. With two undamaged lanterns in hand, the couple climbed the embankment and ran down the track in the direction of the nearest station - that was about three miles. Dr. Wallace rushed about attempting to attend the injured, using whatever useful materials were at hand. Perhaps within a quarter of an hour after the young couple went for help, residents from the neighborhood, curious about the fire, began arriving. Thereafter, a rescue party arrived. This is how it happened.” The gentlemen looked at each other in bewilderment; then Uncle Phesanton asked,

“I thought you said it hadn’t happened yet?” Parthenia smiled graciously, and said,

“In the future, it has happened. Specifically, it was the day after yesterday, which is today... the ever-present present, and it will be so tomorrow... and the next day.” Mr. Guyton exclaimed,

“Say what? That’s complicated philosophy.” Genevieve snatched the journal from Parthenia’s hand, slapped it closed, and placed it in her lap with both hands resting on the cover.

December 23, 1873. In a blinding instant, a gloved hand filled the delicate china coffee cup in front of her. The gentleman across the table was dressed in a gray frock coat, with a beautifully embroidered red vest. The table lamp was decorated with holly; and there was a plate of small squares of white cake stacked in a pile. Glancing down, she saw her dress deerskin gloves, heavy black wool skirt, beautiful black vest,

and her coat with its tiny gold pendant watch. However, a strange new hat weighed down on her like some small animal nesting in her hair. She whispered, "Preston?" He let out a breath of relief, "Genevieve, thank goodness, it's you! I wasn't sure you were ever coming back!" She started to rise and suddenly winced, "Did Parthenia lace up this corset?" She then sat back down. The echoes of hissing, groaning, and tintinnabulation from the locomotives reverberated through the station dining hall. In a hushed voice she said to Preston,

"We are not getting on that train. You are going to take me home... wherever that is." She pulled off her glove, and found a wedding ring. She asked,

"When did that happen?" Startled, he said,

"In 1869... Do you not remember?"

"Good Lord, Preston! How long has it been?" Placing his hand over his eyes, he muttered softly,

"It is December 23, 1873. We are traveling to Petersburg to spend Christmas with your Uncle Phesanton and Aunt Lucinda. You have been looking forward to the trip for months." On hearing this, the color drained from her face. She said,

"Oh... I remember. So, it hasn't been that long." She gives a sign of relief followed by another wince as she put her glove back on. She then produces from her change purse paper money, various scraps of paper, two tickets, several of her calling cards - printed in beautiful script was the name "Mrs. Genevieve Poisson Wallace" - and a folded letter containing a receipt for a tombstone. Puzzling as that might be, it listed the address of their residence - Savannah. She asked,

"What is our address, Preston?"

"Savannah... Are you sure that I married you... not her?" Exasperated, Genevieve snapped,

"We are married, whether I remember the particulars, or not! If it makes you feel better, we can have a minister perform the ceremony again. What difference does it make? Parthenia has only the best intentions... though she is an interloper... and a pest. Nevertheless, I have seen what she wanted me to see while you entertained yourself with... no, I am not going to think about it!" Preston, somewhat bewildered, signaled for the waiter. Genevieve continued,

"I don't care where we are; we are not going any further. There's a blizzard on the way, the train is going to derail in the middle of a trestle, and we're going to die!" Assuring her, he replied,

"We will stay here until the sky is sunny, and all is safe, if that is what will make you happy? All this is new to me; you've never spoken of this before now. I didn't want to go in the first place. Do you need help getting up?" She held out her hand,

"Yes, you steady me. The waiter will help with the chair. After you put on my cloak, I'll take your arm. I am packed in so tightly that I can hardly breathe. Parthenia did this! Be careful getting me in the carriage!"

Preston, falling into his role of dutiful husband to volatile Genevieve rather than quiescent Parthenia, carefully escorted her through the depot. She grasped his arm with an iron grip. Not so much to steady herself, but having been this way before, she was terrified she might be separated from him. During the weeks of her absence, she had lived through the terrifying accident, then languished on the verge of death in a hospital bed. Her legs had to be amputated, then she contracted a fever. Her return came minutes before she slipped away.

As they waited under the steps of the depot for a driver to take them to a hotel, she finally gave in to feelings of guilt.

"Preston, we can't do it. The train is going to derail! There is no way we can just turn our backs and walk away. Nobody would believe us, if we told them what was going to happen. We have to be on that train." Preston paused, pulled a handful of railway tickets from his pocket, and handed them to her,

"Why did you buy a tombstone? The receipt did not say what, if anything, was carved on it. Was it for me?" She shook her head, unable to provide an answer.

A scattering of snowflakes floated on the as the depot bell began to chime. The train was about to leave. As they ascended the steps leading back to the train shed, they were met by a man pushing their baggage on a cart. Preston flipped him a silver dollar in passing. Genevieve struggled to climb the steps, grasping her skirts in one hand, Preston's arm in the other. On reaching the passageway leading to the platform, the locomotive whistle resounded.

December 21, 1856. Plagued by a vague, but unrelenting, uneasiness for more than a week, Thomas Alexander, Superintendent of the Central Railroad, hardly slept more than a few hours each night before sunrise. The feeling seemed to intensify at night after the arrival of the evening express. On inspecting the machine shops and engine house before leaving for home that evening, he stopped to watch the engineer of the Governor Whitfield inspecting his locomotive. Alexander climbed into the cab of the locomotive to watch, then he heard a slight metal ring from behind. He said,

"Did you hear that? Remain quiet for a moment..." Alexander walked into the empty tender, then pressed his ear against its cold interior. Aside from the expected

noises in the adjacent machine shops, and the thumps of the cooling boiler, he heard a strange repetitive high pitch pinging. Turning back to the engineer with a curious look on his face, Alexander said,

“I have never heard a sound quite like that... very strange.” The man replied,

“She’s cooling down, sir. They all make strange sounds when they do that – all of them. They are like living things. Fire makes iron live, you know.” From behind, Alexander heard the voice of a woman whispered,

“Don’t send me out again. I am sick.” Alexander, startled, suddenly turned around. Seeing nothing, he laughed, then said,

“Sick? That is strange.” Puzzled, the engineer asked,

“Did you say that you felt sick, sir?” Alexander climbed down off the locomotive. As he was about to answer the engineer, the voice whispered again,

“Please... there will be a terrible accident... many will die.” Alexander said,

“Tell the foreman of the shops to inspect this engine thoroughly before dispatching it tomorrow. I will speak with him in the morning.”

December 23, 1882. Not long after twilight, the evening express stopped at Spring Garden Station, forty miles north of Wayne City. Sleet was coming down heavily by this time. Parthenia turned to Genevieve, then adjusted a stray lock of her hair. Smiling, she said,

“Uncle is taking a snooze. The conductor will come momentarily to tell us that the telegraph line to the north is down, and the mail train from Orchard has yet to arrive. This is all due to the snowstorm.” Genevieve replied incredulously,

“Parthenia, you must constrain your imagination.” Uncle Phesanton awoke from his nap. Immediately, he noticed the sound of sleet clicking on the roof of the car.

“Is that sleet? Good Lord, ladies, it appears that we have a change in the weather! Why have we stopped?” Parthenia replied,

“We are waiting for the southbound mail train to pass. I think it is a splendid opportunity to save our lives, don’t you think? Snow is rather uncommon in these parts. We have never, in all the times that I can recall, ever had a blizzard of notable proportions. Still, unexpected things happen.” Before she could say another word, the conductor entered their car, announcing the non-arrival of the mail train, and loss of telegraphic communications to the northern division of the line. A message from the superintendent of the railroad transmitted to all the stations in the southern division stated that all traffic on the line was curtailed until the morning. Passengers were

advised to make themselves comfortable insomuch as local accommodations permitted; else, they must stay in the cars.

In a flash, the older Parthenia from 1882 found herself back in the Wayne City Depot – in 1873, the coffee cup on the table was gurgling and sputtering. Before she had a chance to breathe, she was being whirled about in a grand ballroom by Dr. Wallace as a string orchestra played. Her fashionable garb had been replaced with widow's weaves. She let out a scream when she saw the director of the orchestra. It was Genevieve, dressed in blood-red uniform, completely flattened out like a gingerbread man.

"Was this her sister who just... just what, nine years in the future, or the present... Oh, no!" she thought.

In this retrospective vision, a pack of hounds that had been sleeping on the floor near the orchestra were roused by her scream. At once, they lunged in a pack towards her. The coffee cup stopped bubbling, and made a loud thump as its contents exploded up. She felt a sudden constriction around the trunk of her body as if she were in the grasp of a giant. Seamlessly, and without warning, it was 1873 again; and Parthenia had stumbled on the train platform in Genevieve's body.

The rear lantern of the last car of the doomed train was receding into the murky gray afternoon. Preston was, at that moment, helping her to her feet. She could not help but think that Genevieve's momentary lapse into securing her own self-interest had undermined her purpose of being in the past. What now? How content could their lives be – that is, Parthenia of one world, and Genevieve of another – knowing they could have done something to help the doomed, even if they died miserably in the wreck. Instead, Genevieve chose to stand by and let it happen.

The man pushing the Dr. and Mrs. Wallace's baggage caught up with them on the platform. Cheerfully, he announced to the couple that there had been a delay in the schedule due to the non-arrival of the mail train from the north. The next train would leave at five, and they had the whole afternoon to get situated. He would have their baggage put on that train, if they liked. Preston and Genevieve told him that they would. The man, before departing, thanked Preston for his generous gift of a whole dollar, and wished them a happy Christmas journey home. After a moment of forced niceties directed to the man pushing his cart away, Preston whispered,

"How do we know which train will derail?" Parthenia took possession of Genevieve momentarily; then grabbing the sleeve of his coat, she said,

"We were on it!" She immediately departed, back to her time, but her younger counterpart took her place.

Young Parthenia, present in the mind of Genevieve, and Preston left from the southern terminus of the Central Railroad at 6 P.M. on December 23, 1873. The train

traveled slowly through the darkness as a mix of snow and sleet came on in periodic bursts. Parthenia sat close to the window, gazing out and seeing nothing discernable; she continued to hold Preston's arm tightly, nervously rubbing his coat sleeve. The thought of the pain and fear of her death experience was never far from her mind. She and... It wasn't Preston.... It was a boy from the Deep South who had never seen much snow.

December 23, 1882. It was 7:45 P.M. when the stationmaster at Spring Garden received the superintendent's telegram informing him that all traffic on the line was to cease. The southbound mail train arrived five minutes later, its cars covered with a layer of snow. By this time, Spring Garden had received a light dusting, but that was about to change. As the temperature plunged, droplets that had leaked from the water tank in tender onto its rear axles froze; and the crack expanded.

When Genevieve left her seat to talk to the conductor, Parthenia seized the opportunity to take back her journal. Opening it to the page where her story was interrupted, she turned to Uncle Phesanton and Mr. Guyton, and sighed,

"Gentlemen, would you like for me to continue the entertainment while we are waiting?" Mr. Guyton replied,

"Please do, Miss Poisson. We have nothing to do other than wait; and perhaps, a goodly period of it, I am certain." Parthenia smiled graciously, then began to read.

"Preston struggled to understand how two people could forget an entire part of their life, the most important part, at that; now, finding themselves together, trying to stop a train accident, 'How was this to be done, you had not explained; if it couldn't be done, what happens to us?' Genevieve, once again, considered the possibility that Parthenia was playing with her, and none of it was happening. Her 'secret friend' had switched places with her. Preston really loved Genevieve, not Parthenia! Even so, Genevieve wanted to kill her off. By missing the train that was destined to derail on a trestle, Parthenia no longer had a purpose in inhabiting Genevieve's mind... Now, she would have to live with her guilt." Mr. Guyton asked,

"Why, might I ask, did you give the characters in your story the names Parthenia, Genevieve, and Preston? I could see your sister becoming agitated when you spoke the name of her deceased husband. He died in a train wreck, didn't he?" Parthenia took a handkerchief from her sleeve, and dabbed her lips. After clearing her throat, she said,

"Sir, a person should write about things they know. You will see for yourself. Allow me to continue." Turning the page of her journal, she read,

“Ten miles into their journey, the train on which Parthenia and Preston were riding stopped at a turnout. After the engineer maneuvered the train onto a branch track that paralleled the main line south for a few miles, he accomplished a return in the direction of Wayne City. The conductor informed the passengers that the train was returning to the depot, and that they would have to find rooms at the hotels of the town until the snowstorm was over. The telegraph lines were down, and it was no longer safe to have trains moving. Parthenia asked the conductor about the earlier passenger train. He said it had been stopped at Spring Garden, twenty miles north. Before the telegraph went down, he had heard that they were safe, though perhaps not as comfortable with the accommodations as could be had in Wayne City. The conductor recommended Griswold’s Hotel as a suitable place for married folk. With those words, he continued on to other passengers. Older Parthenia – much like me, suddenly animated, said, ‘Did you hear that? All the trains have been stopped at stations. That means the accident isn’t going to happen!’ Preston added, ‘And it will stay that way until they get the telegraph working - maybe days?’ As they left the cars, Preston felt happier than he could ever recall. Maybe the same was true for her? At the height of his lovely thoughts, the puzzle of the blank tombstone intruded. Something tragic is waiting for them at home in Savannah; and it might change their plans for domestic contentment. Was it a portent of his death cloaked in this illusion? As they walked to their platform under the vast train shed, Parthenia attempted to depart, returning Genevieve to her body, but suddenly an unfamiliar force barred her retreat. She gasped, and whispered to herself, ‘No, how could that be? I am thinking his thoughts! Preston is fighting me! He wants to imprison me here, forced to act her part – my cards with her name on them!’ Without uttering a word, he spoke to her through her thoughts, ‘Parthenia, why did you purchase a tombstone for me? Genevieve doesn’t know, but you do. I will let you pass after you tell the truth.’ Genevieve watched the conflict between the two outside and above, as from a balcony.” Uncle Phesanton and Mr. Guyton gasped in unison. Parthenia closed her journal, then smiled.

December 22, 1856. Superintendent Alexander slept fitfully, tormented by the nightmare pleading of not one female voice, but three of different ages. Each imploring him to do something, but what? He wasn’t sure. Then, in his dream, he found himself in the cab of the Governor Whitfield. The engineer and fireman were missing. Clinging to his side was a fearful young girl, shivering. The sky was dark, and the landscape was veiled by heavy snowfall. The locomotive was speeding forward under a full head of steam. The open firebox cast a brilliant light towards the tender. Then, he heard a weak muttering, “I’m sick!” When he directed his gaze back to the tender, he saw a mature woman seated on the log pile, bathed in the glow from the firebox. The metallic ping he had heard when he visited the shops repeated

periodically, each time he could feel it. The young girl clung to him ever the more tightly after this sound commenced, burying her face in his overcoat. Then, there appeared another woman in a hooded cape walking along the railing outside the boiler. On reaching the cab, she held out her hand, clad in a deer skin glove, to Alexander. He helped her into the cab. Removing her hood, she then looked directly into his eyes, then said,

“Sir, we have little time left! Signal the brakemen, and apply your breaks! The Carter Creek trestle is a quarter-mile away! Please!” With hesitation, he pulled the cord, released steam, and applied the brakes. The brakemen on the cars turned their handbrakes. The train shuttered, then with a loud thud, the axle snapped in two! There was a sudden jump of the tender followed by the breaking of the pin in the coupler. The locomotive continued forward, dragging the tender, its rear wheels having left the track. The cars that the locomotive had been pulling piled into each other after the lead car encountered the splayed rails. The locomotive, after traveling a considerable distance further, came to an abrupt stop - venting steam in a cloud the enveloped the locomotive and tender, so much as to impair Alexander’s vision. As he stroked the head of the young girl that clung to his side, he felt the arms of the two mature women that had urged him on this heroic feat wrap around him. Rudely awakened by the impact of having made contact with the bedroom floor, Alexander scrambled to his feet, then took a seat on the edge of his bed. The room was weakly lit my morning twilight. His considerations had solidified into resolve: the Governor Whitfield would not be pulling any trains until he was satisfied it was safe.

In 1856, the timetable of the Central Rail Road was different. The afternoon express left at three from Wayne City; and at six, the mail train was dispatched. Young Parthenia Poisson boarded the express with her Uncle Phesanton and Aunt Lucinda on their holiday trip to Petersburg. The locomotive pulling the train was a rugged piece of equipment called *The Herald*. Alexander had made the substitution that morning. Waiting on the platform to see the train off, he was taken aback to see a young girl waiting to board that looked like the one that clung to him in his dream. On seeing him, young Parthenia waved. He tipped his hat, and bowed. She giggled, and said,

“A Happy Christmas to you, sir!”

The unexpected blizzard started ten miles before the train reached Carter Creek. The engineer slowed the locomotive and the sleet turned to snow. As the train crossed safely over the long trestle, the course of history in three worlds changed. Young Parthenia did not die that day. She arrived in Orchard with her aunt and uncle where they remained snowbound for the next two days. Thereafter, through many travails, she lived a long, productive life; passing peacefully at the age of eighty-three.

As a consequence, her sojourns into the worlds of her counterparts never happened. It was the older Parthenia, acting her part – the lines of communication reversed. Yet, there was a problem – Superintendent Alexander.

If Parthenia was not in mortal danger of freezing to death as a result of the train wreck, her counterparts would have never been called upon to place apprehension and doubt into the mind of Alexander; thus, the accident would happen. Young Parthenia was doomed to a paradoxical loop where she both died and lived on until, in the usual course of things, Alexander, hopefully, acted on the problem without the ladies' intervention. The young man from the Deep South broke the cycle by taking his seat in the cars early.

He, unfortunately, took the seat that the gentleman who had the piece of metal driven into his brain would have taken. Aunt Lucinda held the boy in her arms as his life slipped away. She and Parthenia, who had been seated with Uncle Phesanton were helping the injured. The young lady who was formerly crushed to death was fortunate this time around. The gentleman who did not take the seat where a piece of metal would be driven through his skull sat across from the lady, and her traveling companion, a genteel matron. When the gentleman tried to strike up a conversation with the younger, the older insisted in a tone of disapproval that they remove to a different section of the car. As a result, the younger lady was saved from her painful death. The presence or absence in the world after that had little discernible consequence in the short term. That is only the story of young Parthenia.

December 23, 1873. In a blinding instant, a gloved hand filled the delicate china coffee cup in front of her. Genevieve was jolted into the moment by the sight of the black sleeves of her dress. On her hands were black cloth gloves, not her favorite deer skins. Her hat had a long black veil. She was wearing widow's weaves! Across the table from her was Aunt Lucinda and Uncle Phesanton. Aunt Lucinda said,

"It will be good for you, poor dear, to spend Christmas with us. If it pleases you to stay through the winter, we will be happy to have you. The unexpected passing of your husband was a tragic blow. Now, you need the comfort of family to help you regain your footing." Genevieve opened her black cloth purse, and removed the receipt from the stonecutter. The inscription was included, "Dr. Preston John Wallace, Physician and Loving Husband; Born, December 23, 1840, Died, September 27, 1873." Genevieve looked at Aunt Lucinda, then said,

"Today would have been his birthday. I think it will be the finest gift imaginable to be with him this evening... but, that would be wrong for the both of you." With concern, Uncle Phesanton asked,

“What are you saying, dear?” Genevieve, still holding the stonecutter’s receipt, placed her hand on Aunt Lucinda’s hand.

“You will be happy together a bit longer in this life.” Genevieve rose from the table, and left the parlor in the depot. Upon reaching the concourse, she asked a porter on which track was the evening express. He told her, “Yes, ma’am, the express is on track three.” On reaching the train shed, she felt the frigid gust, and looked out to the end of the platform. It was snowing. Behind her, Genevieve heard the voices of her aunt and uncle calling out to her. Looking back, she saw them rushing up, her uncle carrying her coat on his arm. She called out,

“Follow me, Uncle! There is something you must see.” She walked briskly along the platform until she reached the locomotive. Addressing the engineer in the cab, she said,

“Sir, please help me down from here! I must show you something!” Dumbfounded, he said,

“What? Down near the engine? You can’t do that!” Genevieve placed the receipt between her lips, and climbed down off the platform onto the track bed. The engineer, and the fireman, scrambled down from the locomotive, meeting a terrified Uncle Phesanton and Aunt Lucinda. The engineer commanded Genevieve to come out from between the cars. Instead, she went down on her hands and knees, and crawled under the back of the tender. The engineer, fireman, and Uncle jumped down from the platform to retrieve her.

On reaching the rear axle, Genevieve pulled off her glove, and ran her hand over its contour. Finding the crack in facing downwards, she took the receipt from her teeth, and started inserting it into the crack. At that moment, she felt a hand grab her shoe. She kicked free, and inserted the paper into the crack just in time. Hands closed around both her ankles, then she was being roughly dragged from beneath the tender. Pulled out into the light, and turned upright, she pointed under the tender and exclaimed loudly,

“See there! The rear axle is cracked! I could slip a piece of paper in it nearly half way!” Uncle Phesanton peeked under the tender, and saw the paper. He said,

“Good Lord, she’s right!” The conductor, who had joined in the commotion, said,

“Get that lady up off the ground before somebody sees you! We can’t have any talk! What is this all about?” The fireman looked under the tender, and said,

“Would you look at that? You have to see this! We have a crack in this axle, and it is nothing to laugh about!” After the engineer and conductor took a look, they called over the foreman of the shops. The tender was uncoupled from the train, and the locomotive was taken to the shops. The locomotive and tender from the mail train

was coupled onto the express. Genevieve was escorted to the office of the superintendent to explain herself.

Though the railroad conducted an investigation into the incident, there was not a logical reason why Genevieve could have known about the cracked axle. Being from another state, and never given the opportunity to examine the locomotive, the tale that Genevieve told the authorities would have to do. Having been instructed to perform her heroic actions by her husband from beyond the grave on his birthday, however, was not recorded in the official report. The investigator for the railroad termed her actions the result of “special intuition.” Much later, she learned that her parents had concealed from her that she had a twin named Parthenia who had died at three weeks old. For Genevieve, that explained why she always felt a presence, and an absence, in her life. She sold the house in Savannah, and moved to Petersburg. After Aunt Lucinda died in 1881, she took charge of Uncle Phesanton’s household until his death in 1908. After Genevieve saved the train, Parthenia never inhabited her mind again; nor did Genevieve remarry.

December 24, 1882. Parthenia awoke to the brilliant milky light of an overcast sky reflected off the snow-covered landscape, huddled with her sister in their seat in the passenger car. Uncle Phesanton and Mr. Guyton had given the ladies their thick wool overcoats to use as blankets. Parthenia’s arm was wrapped around her sister, and Genevieve’s head rested on her shoulder. Turning, she brushed the fallen dark locks from Genevieve’s face, and kissed her forehead. Parthenia felt curiously different, but refreshed. Mr. Guyton took a deep breath, then opened his eyes. Parthenia gave the disheveled young man a warm smile, then said,

“Thank you, Mr. Guyton, for sacrificing the comfort you might have enjoyed by keeping your coat so the two of us were spared the evening’s chill. I believe the one covering me belongs to you. Please, take it... I sense your restlessness. You want to go out and take a look about.” He whispered,

“Your uncle is still sleeping... before I wander out, I’ll ask the porter to bring us tea?”

“Coffee, sir. Have the porter bring strong coffee for both of us. My sister is having time relinquishing her dream. She is likely staying for the last waltz.”

While the twins had enjoyed their coffee, Uncle Phesanton and Mr. Guyton donned their coats and hats to venture out into the icy abode of like-minded menfolk, risking frostbite or a nasty fall in the pursuit of boyish fellowship. Parthenia, sensing the men would soon find the axle broken apart by water that had frozen in the crack; and with that, she would lose contact with her secret companion forever. Her mind travelled the void between worlds searching for a familiar sensation of unity – the

same as she shared with her twin. She found her counterpart in the near present, removed in the future by a mere few hours. She was in Wayne City.

December 24, 1882. Young Parthenia, now thirty-nine, and Preston arrived at the Griswold by the hotel's horse-drawn omnibus at around ten o'clock with snow coming down heavily. The streets they traveled along the way, nearly empty, were covered with snow. The driver of the omnibus said to the shivering porter unloading the bags,

"It is my honor to introduce Dr. and Mrs. Preston Wallace." Parthenia, the observing spinster, was shocked! Her counterpart had met and married her widowed sister's husband... and he will be alive in the future! On entering the hotel, the manager explained,

"While the hotel anticipated its dining room and bar would receive heavy business on Christmas Eve from the general public, the number of guests would likely remain small until the New Year due to a unprecedented dumping of snow. It never happens here – not on Christmas – not at all. Perhaps, once in a generation... if that?" As the manager gave the couple a leisurely tour of the hotel before dinner was served, the not-so-young Parthenia scribbled in her journal. She told the manager that she wrote a column for a newspaper, so he indulged her request with elaborate detail. As she was writing the observing Parthenia could hear her voice.

"The Griswold Hotel is a four-story brick structure located several blocks away from the railroad depot in Wayne City. Built before the Civil War, it has undergone recent renovations, and is considered the best hotel on the line, even though others offer more spacious rooms and had modern conveniences; the Griswold has always been managed with an emphasis of quality service by two generations of the same family." The observing Parthenia paged through her journal, looking for her last entry, December 22. Lo, to her surprise, she too was a journalist! The words of her counterpart matched exactly what she had written.

"The facade of the first floor features elaborate carved cornice work, Corinthian columns, and steps cut from Contentnea granite. Situated to the left of the entrance is an elegant dining room with windows with large panes framed in stained glass offering a view of the streets. Right off the entrance, patrons will find a bar and cigar shop with doors facing the street and the alley running the length of the right side and continuing to the next street. A carriage house is located at the rear of the building. Guests can hire out a carriage and driver by the day, or use the hotel's omnibus which makes regular runs between the railroad station, the hotel, and city hall. Passing through the front entrance, guests will see first the elegant double French doors on both sides opening to the dining room and the bar. In the center of the hall, the

clerk's desk is flanked by two elaborate mahogany staircases ascending to the second story balcony. The second story rooms are larger than the next two floors, but all are tastefully furnished. Each floor has a sitting room, water closet, and other pleasantries. On the first floor there is a barber and bootblack located in a shop on the alley side, and baths with hot and cold water. The first floor is heated with new steam radiators; as were the parlors and sitting rooms on all floors. The rooms have coal stoves; but eventually, all rooms will have radiators.” Paging through her journal, the observing Parthenia found more notes and narratives – not one story of the fanciful sort!

After a pleasant dinner, the couple retired to their room on the second floor. The connections between the worlds of the counterparts was severed forever. For the first time, Parthenia realized some aspects of these worlds were constant, and others were variable. In every world that contained a version of Parthenia – living, dead, or dying – there was a locomotive attached to a tender with a cracked axle. There was a railroad called the Central Rail Road (or later, Central Railroad) that traveled through the same landscape with the same station stops. Spring Garden Station and Carter Creek Trestle were places on the line in all three worlds. Yet, there were some differences - all subtle - but they made an enormous difference. The year 1856 was a leap year, so the snowstorm occurred a day earlier in young Parthenia’s world – December 22, 1856 was the 357th day of the year; whereas in 1873 and 1882, that day fell a day later. It seemed as though the years of the broken axle were offset by primes: seventeen years between the first (1856) and second (1873) worlds, and thirteen years between the second (1873) and third (1882) worlds. Parthenia dismissed such considerations as futile mental exercise since these worlds were closed to further observation. What troubled her, however, was the fate of Dr. Preston John Wallace. He died young in whatever world he married Genevieve; but in a world – her own world – where Preston had the choice of either of the twins, he married Genevieve. Parthenia had also been in love with him. How shameful! Immediately, she put aside her flights of imagination. No such other worlds existed outside her mind. It was all daydreaming, and nothing more.

Uncle Phesanton and Mr. Guyton returned, excited as children, anxious to tell the ladies what they had seen on their romp in the snow. By this time, a meager meal consisting of ham stew and toasted bread was being served. The express, usually making it run in six and a half hours, had enough provision in stock for one meal per trip, morning and evening. Even so, there was an ample supply of coffee and tea. Fortunately, on this particular trip, the number of passengers were few, so the store of provisions on board was sufficient to prepare several mundane meals through Christmas morning. On being seated in the dining car, the gentlemen told the twins about the broken axle. It had happened sometime during the night. Mr. Guyton remarked how lucky they were that it had not happened while the train was in motion. Genevieve remarked,

“Parthenia, dear, I sure your readers will find it exciting! Tell them how being snowbound at this station saved our lives.” Placing her hand on Genevieve’s sleeve, Parthenia said,

“Five miles from this place, up the track, is a long stretch of trestlework crossing Carter Creek. Had we continued under better weather – it is almost a certainty, if the express followed the old timetable – the axle might have broken there. We would not be enjoying our Christmas together.” Uncle Phesanton interjected,

“Strange you should say that. In 1837, about two years before the railroad was completed, a train left the track when crossing that trestle. In those days, the engines were the English style, and they pulled, at most, two passenger cars.” Genevieve asked,

“How many were killed?” He replied,

“I do not recall. At the time, I was away at school – about twenty years old, maybe. It happened on the last day of February.” Parthenia grasped Genevieve’s hand tightly, then said,

“Come what may – here and beyond – we will always be together.”

IN LIBRARY TIME

James C. Burke

Lavinia Vivienne Dempsey, frequently a historian in some versions of forever, occupied the microfilm room of the first floor of the campus library at the university. For her, there seemed to be a lot of variations of this regularly recurring loop, and as a result, she had become an expert in the alternate histories of the early twenty-first century, 2000-2002. It was, however, difficult dealing with being a different variation of herself every eight hours and thirty-nine minutes. But, the relative safety of this pocket of order alleviated the dreamlike quality of ever shifting realities. Loops could be particularly advantageous, if they were the right duration and the conditions were pleasant. One really didn't have to worry about eating or sleeping, because a person would be in the same condition as he or she started out when the loop cycled back. Being elsewhere, in a past or present, could last a matter minutes or years; and was almost always an unpleasant experience due to the uncertainty of its duration. The great question, nevertheless, was how time and space lost its meaning; and surely, that was a historical question.

It happened gradually, starting with small cracks in the fabric of reality in what Lavinia termed "nominal existence," sometime during 2000-01 when she was working as a financial officer for the firm Brumbaugh & Clark. She suspected that some perturbation in the usual flow had occurred and caused these eddies in time and space. The main flow, twisted into braids, continued forward. At least, that's how a physics student in the library coffee shop explained his take on being in the loop. There didn't seem to be a better explanation other than the afterlife. If that, it likely wasn't paradise. Besides, the concept of a non-corporeal existence did not match up. Following her near-death experience, being buried in an avalanche, nothing appeared to have changed. This had occurred after she venture to explore the outside using the

portal in the concessions room. Lavinia was no include to try that again unless there was good reason. Staying put or not deviating from the path kept you in the loop.

The one thing about spending forever in a university library that is familiar to anybody spending an hour in a university library, you never see anybody you know except the librarians. Lavinia had managed to meet a physics student, Horace Fillyaw Pratt, in the coffee shop; but he, like her, seemed to appear radically different each time they met. They always found each other because they were outsiders; those around them seemed at home, like never having been outside the university. She finally put aside library etiquette, and called out his name throughout the stacks on all four floors. Finally finding him in the coffee shop, located to the right of the circulation desk, she said,

“If that is you, Mr. Pratt; let me say that I have spent a consider portion of my time this evening looking for you. That is you?”

“Lavinia?”

“It is you! You look rather handsome since you shaved your head. Some men do not have the right head shape for it; but you do.”

“Oh, so that is what is new today. Did you know you are a blond today?”

“No, Horace, you’re joking!”

“I am not. Check yourself in the mirror when you get a chance. It is a quarter of nine. Sit down, and I’ll get your coffee before they close shop for the night.” On returning, he said,

“Somebody scratched their ear, or dropped a pencil, or left at 12:01 instead of 12:00, so there had to a universe that contained that variation, and maybe, that universe was only local. That is, only containing all the possible variations that could occur in this library at these hours on this particular day.”

He speculated, though he had not bothered to approach the problem empirically, that variations without the library would belong to a larger scale universe that might not contain the university, a Lavinia, and/or a Horace. Things that seemed to appear over and again in each variation, must exist on some larger scale. The library varied slightly in its layout, color scheme, and carpeting; but was architecturally, the same structure. She said,

“We change. Why should we look completely different, sometimes unrecognizable to each other, and that the interior of this building only changes slightly?”

He remained quiet for a while, then looking at her, he realized the changes were only superficial: she looked different to him, not because she was in a different body,

because she made her body look different. The variant was the fashion; different hair color, different hair length, different makeup, different clothing, different jewelry, cosmetic alterations, sun exposure, were possible choices that worked in this recursive universe. They were variations; perhaps, random selections from current fashion. The library contained enough information in the form of periodicals, newspapers, and non-print media to assemble the fashion paradigm for the late-1990s up to 2002. He said,

“It only seems like we’re different because people usually settle on a look they are comfortable presenting in public, and change it slightly for different situations. Nobody undergoes a complete makeover on a daily basis. We appear different in ways that are usually a matter of choice. Our bodies have not aged a full day, since... I have not been keeping track, it must be years.” Lavinia pondered what he had said, excused herself, then went to the ladies room.

After looking probingly at her reflection in the mirror, she realized he was right. The long cultivated mental image of herself now merged with the reflection. The short bleached blonde hair, cosmetic surgery, and the sleeveless pastel dress was not her style, but it was her. In fact, it felt somewhat liberating to look like this. She would have never made these choices about her appearance unless she had to conceal her identity; but here, it was impossible to have an identity. A second after two in the morning, it would be something else; perhaps, something drab, or even disgusting.

On returning from the ladies room, she found Horace pondering the text of the printout on the upcoming book, Colonel William Williams, Memoir of the Champagne-Marne Offensive. Without looking up, Horace asked,

"Who is Colonel William Williams?"

She told him that she did not know, but there seemed to be many recent feature articles in the newspapers about him, even though he died in 1932; and somebody with her exact same name, also a resident of Savannah, Georgia, published a book about the man. Unfortunately, it would not be out until the fall – since it was always August 6-7, 2002, they would never know. If Horace was correct, she thought, it was something that seemed changeable; perhaps, part of the larger context. Horace then asked,

“Well, did you write it?” She shook her head, suggesting more the impression of not knowing than denying. Gazing over his shoulder at the review in the magazine, she said,

“Let’s do some research, Horace. I am almost certain there is something completely wrong with this. This Colonel William Williams sounds like the renegade that is causing mayhem in the out-world.”

Dr. Elbert “Bert” Fowler, a 58 year-old geology professor, was taking a leisurely drive to Baltimore to attend a weekend conference on January 5, 2001. His journey began in Savannah at 7:51 P.M. that day, and he figured he would drive until he was tired. It is a straight shot up I-95, with plenty of places along the way to stay over. He drove most of the night, stopping once to fuel up; but around 2 A.M., he exited the interstate at Rocky Mount, North Carolina, so he could enjoy the feeling of emerging from the darkness to a misty winter landscape after napping till daybreak, if possible. Things did not go as he planned.

At the concession area of the rest stop, he purchased some very strong coffee in a flimsy paper cup and some salty peanuts from a vending machine. On returning to his car, he noticed an old rusty pickup parked under the lights opposite his car. There were people sleeping on the ground near the truck under large quilts spread out on the pavement. Feeling a little uneasy, having never seen anything of the like, he decided to continue driving.

The traffic a thinned out considerably; and as he approached the Virginia line, there was a semi-truck lit up like a Christmas tree, and nothing else. Bert had, during his years as a graduate student during the 1970s, spent a week of one summer vacation on a bike-hike adventure northeastern North Carolina and the Outer Banks with a physics student, Horace Pratt and a couple of lady friends. They were, at the time, all high energy types that liked to get started at first light. There always seemed to be a mist hanging just above the fields as they rode their bikes on the rural roads between I-95 and the coast. Bert had lost contact with him after graduation. Now, he entertained thoughts of regret to accompany the nostalgia. Always planning to look up his pal Horace, he let the opportunity for a reunion slip through the cracks between the years. Blissfully, he mumbled,

“Yes, adventure on the open road! Camping under the stars, and eating beans and franks from a can!” That was the sort of thing young people did in those days – a fact that his students found unbelievable. A middle aged gentleman in taking one of his classes said,

“That’s your generation, Dr. Fowler. I’ll bet you five dollars, not one of these young folks takes a joyride, much less goes on road trips.” The romance of youth – those Earth pleasures – had gone the way of so many other good things. Maybe, he thought, with retirement in sight, there might be a little time left to revisit them.

The truck took the Emporia exit; and that was the last moving vehicle he would see for a while. Daylight seemed to be taking the scenic route that morning – that is, in his memory, but it was still early. Still, something did not seem quite right. He felt like he was going in the wrong direction. He vaguely recalled seeing a sign a few miles back that said something about a crater. He read somewhere that A Union general – maybe Burnside – had his sappers tunnel under the Confederate lines. There they

placed explosives, and blew a big crater in the ground. It happened at the Battle of Petersburg. Bert figured he must have turned off on the 295, bypassing Petersburg and Richmond. He then noticed something he had never seen before: herds of large white mice crossed the road *en masse* ahead of him. Something was not right! He pulled off on the shoulder of the road. He thumbed through the road atlas till he found the Virginia map. The next place of any note on the 295 was Hopewell. That is, if he were still traveling north. After driving for a while, Bert encountered another sign. It read, "Craters of the Moon National Monument." At the exit, he hit the brakes. It was the junction of I-15 South and State Highway 33 – Idaho 33! "No, that can't be... no, no," he muttered to himself as he flipped through his atlas.

During the first week of December of 2000, the following email made the rounds on the miscellaneous business memo circuit of concessions contractors,

"Vending machines at various sites in eastern North Carolina are causing some concerns to our company auditor. The money they are bringing in does not reconcile with an account of the items vended. One vending machine at a certain gas station, in particular, exhibited a malfunction indicative of the problem observed in several other models. The salted peanuts, according to our records, had not been replenished lately. When the machine was checked on site, the salted peanuts appeared to be the only item that hadn't been vended. However, when it was tested, it always vended. The mechanism never hung up. Due to this unexplained surplus of \$105.50, this machine was switched out. While this might seem to be a matter of minor consequence, corporate headquarters cannot abide the thought that customers are being cheated out of their fair share of salted peanuts. Also, the revenue from the coffee vending machine at the same location jumped drastically during the third quarter of 2000. Our technicians have ruled out Y2K complications. Please file for future consumer complains should they arise."

Outside the fact that the author mistakenly thought the offending machines were taken out of service, this seemingly inconsequential piece of information was the crucial clue to understanding why the world came to an end, and it would remain stored on a corporate email server, useless to anybody. Even so, its meaning would only be discernable to a historian – the peanuts and coffee were vended flawlessly! The surplus of these items had appeared out of the air... or rather, from elsewhere.

Indeed, the world came to an end sometime in the past; or rather, the predictable continuity of the events that represented the concept "world" came to an end, and past ceased to be measurable. The resulting reality was a rather random mix of loops, reversions to a faux past in a parallel universe, alternate presents, and a discontinuity of place. Time appeared to be moving forward in skips and jerks, but anything like a twenty-four hour day was a distant memory. There were pockets of order that

appeared, and one could actually do something for a while, but these were short-lived. Remarkably, it was hardly noticeable early on since nobody had yet stumbled into the actual past; nor did a few persons going missing here and there arouse general concern. The illusion of a well-ordered universe was still firmly entrenched.

It was still dark when Bert drove into Idaho Falls. There were no cars on the road. None of the places where he stopped were open. Somehow, in spite of his intense feeling of disorientation, the fact that Idaho Falls appeared to be closed down for the night seemed comforting. It felt normal. At a well-lit intersection, he stopped for a red light. To his right, he saw a young couple in a beat-up old clunker. The boy had his hand firmly fixed to the steering wheel, while the girl's arm hung over his shoulder. Her long straight hair reflected the eerie pinkish orange of the streetlights, and the red of the stoplight bathed the interior of their car transforming the visage of their young faces into something theatrical. The changing of the light to green lent them a more spectral appearance; then they turned off the main highway, pursued whatever walk of life they claimed. Outside of Idaho Falls, Bert pulled off onto the shoulder. Struggling to understand his predicament, he felt both fearful and giddy at the same time - his hands firmly grasped the steering wheel as if they were glued there. He remembered the boy at the stoplight. It looked as though the boy felt the same way, or so it seemed.

Bert had finally regained his composure after fitfully laughing himself to hyperventilation. He really wanted to cry or scream, but somehow lacked the right emotion to accomplish either. How do you end manage to travel from Virginia to Idaho and not realize you had done it? Bert remembered something from a college psychology class about the fugue state. People under particular stress sometime unknowingly assume another life – for years, even – then suddenly snap out of it. They find themselves living in a strange house married to a stranger who can't understand why their spouse is acting strangely. Just how long had he been driving around the country? The mind of the scientist was beginning to creep back into action. Regardless of what had happened, Bert needed to be somewhere other than Idaho. Savannah would be preferable. He turned to US map in the front of his atlas. The route east would begin in Cove Fort, Utah, where Interstate 70 begins. When he made it to St. Louis, he would take I-55 to Jackson, then I-20 to Atlanta, then I-75 to the Macon and finally, I-16 back to beautiful, historic Savannah. He glanced over to the sticker the lube guys had placed on his windshield the day before he left for Baltimore. The car's mileage at the time of the oil change is printed on those things. By comparing the mileage on the sticker to the odometer reading, he could calculate how many miles he had driven.

Bert peeled the sticker from his windshield and stuck it on the glass below the steering wheel so he could compare it with the LED digits of his mileage display. The difference between the readings was only 533.1 miles! What was going on here? The drive from Savannah to Petersburg is about 450 miles! From the corner of his eye, he noticed the green digits of the digital clock on the dashboard read 4:45. It had been about 2 A.M. when he stopped at Rocky Mount. Or was it? Idaho is in the Mountain Time Zone, so 4:45 A.M. is 6:45 AM Eastern Standard Time. The car clock, however, was not synchronized to an external clock, so it was still on Eastern Standard Time – thus, 2:45 in Idaho. It was as though he had driven through a wormhole. Did it really matter what day it was? The situation was impossible, regardless. This, thought Bert, was a very realistic dream that he couldn't wake up from, or some type of psychosis. At worse, he might be dead and this is the afterlife. If the latter were true, he had better get used to it. He eased back onto the road, and headed off to Pocatello.

The more he thought about it, the notion of spending eternity exploring the American landscape seemed far more appealing than accompanying the angelic chorus with a harp as he stroll the golden streets of the New Jerusalem – the ultimate Euclidean dystopia espoused by Slicker-Vickers, and oligarchs. After all, he was planning to do that anyway when he retired. Bert was momentarily distracted from his metaphysical revelry by the appearance of headlights in his rearview mirror. He hadn't seen another vehicle since Idaho Falls. It was one of those trucks all lit up like Christmas trees. When the truck was within a few lengths of Bert's car, the driver turned on the hazard lights and blew the air horn twice. The driver then pulled up beside Bert, and once again blew the horn twice, then accelerated. The logo on the back of the trailer the truck was hauling caught Bert's attention as it pulled away into the darkness. It was a coat of arms with a large open peapod with green peas rolling out. Above the pod were large black letters "P.P." in Old English typeface topped with a golden crown. The entire image was painted on a red-orange background shaped like a shield. The inscription on the coat of arms read "Prince of Peas." What?

The truck pulled ahead, then disappeared into the distance. The beeping of his cellular phone startled Bert. He groped about the car seat for the phone. The screen was lit up with a text message. It read, "GOOD FOOD, NXT EXT. PP." The time at the bottom of the screen was 03:21 am. The screen on the phone when blank, then the words "NO NETWORK" appeared. The time on the car's clock read 5:23.

In the microfilm room of the library, Lavinia found a roll containing Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1780's-1917 (Record Group 94). There were several officers by the name of Colonel William Williams, but could not be matched to the period, or the particular battle mentioned in the magazine article. She then checked Registers of the United States Army, and also came up blank. Horace, paging through

a book on the Second Battle of the Marne found a handwritten letter on an old piece of paper at the beginning of a chapter on the Champagne-Marne Offensive. The letter was addressed to Miss Lavinia Dempsey, Savannah, Georgia, and dated Saturday, January 6, 1883. He said,

“Listen to this. ‘Dearest Lavinia: On my way to the camp, I encountered what appeared to be herds of mice making deadly dashes across the tracks. Here and there, a fox – or whatever passes for a fox in these parts – waited by the side of the road ready to dart out to retrieve one of the less fortunate of the rodent world. This is a rather disturbing experience because by the time you see the little bastards no reflex is quick enough to avoid what you can only imagine; I would guess that the ones you do see, the leaders, probably make it across, and the followers are crushed beneath the wheels. For the lone fox, this mismatch between technology and blind instinct is a boon.’ I suppose he means the reflexes of the mice... maybe, the fox? I don’t know. Certainly, not the engineer of the train! I assume road means railroad.” Lavinia interjected,

“Now, that is interesting! My great-grandmother on my father’s side was named Lavinia! Who is the author of that letter?” Turning to the last page of the letter, he answered,

“It says, ‘Bert J. Fowler, Missoula, Montana’” She replied,

“Let’s hear the rest of it!” He continued,

“Truck stop? No, this wasn’t written in 1883! ‘My only direct contact with the people of Idaho occurred in the early hours at a truck stop. I remember the place vividly. The entire interior was painted lime green! There was a diner in this establishment where I purchased some coffee. The stove and other equipment in the diner appeared to be ancient. The booths were of a heavy construction, and stained a dark color. There was a man in western attire at one of these booths reading what appeared to be a college textbook. The young woman at the cash register of the diner had a sleeping infant in a type of canvas pouch hanging from a strap around her neck. Her countenance betrayed a type of serenity the seemed out of place in this world of oppressive colors and heavy shapes. Her white waitress uniform glowed angelic against the murky background – one could imagine her as the visage of Persephone set apart from the gloom of the underworld. The cowboy student put down his book on seeing a smiling grandmotherly figure approach with a plate of bacon and eggs in one hand and a coffee pot in the other. She, like almost all the people I met in Idaho over the last few days, appeared to be of a sturdy build with a pale, clear complexion. By contrast, both Southerners, and the folk of the Southwest – that is, those of European descent - have a tan in some degree, and a complexion that readily gives way to blemishes and wrinkles. I saw the sign for Craters of the Moon National Monument before reaching the US 26 exit on I-15. The highway also leads to two

places with rather unusual names. The first is called Atomic City. Behind this rather ominous name, as I was later to learn, there was actually a town with a population approaching thirty. The second town, Arco (violinists might recognize this as the Italian word instructing them to play with their bow) was named for a German count and was the first town to have electric power produced by a nuclear reactor. The name 'Craters of the Moon' intrigued me, and had I been traveling alone, I would have been willing to wait for daylight to find out what these craters were. We must travel here together next summer before I begin work on my doctorate. We can attempt to relive that magical summer when we explored Northeastern North Carolina in 1873.' I must be misreading his handwriting. It must be 1973. Did you go on a bike trip with this fellow?" She replied,

"I was three years old in 1973!" He asked,

"So, you're thirty-eight? You don't look a day over twenty-five to me." Somewhat insulted, Lavinia snapped,

"That's a fine thing to say to a lady! I am thirty-two years old, if you want to know... you... varmint! Read the rest of the letter."

"Mr. Fowler continues by saying 'I am sorry that we could not meet in the library before I left for Baltimore. If Horace shows up, give him my regards.' No... Who is this guy? There is some romantic nonsense here – I'm not reading it aloud – then 'Access instructions' – he wants you to run a program!" Lavinia, irritated, said,

"It's not me, Horace! I don't think he is referring to you!" Handing the letter to her, he said,

"You'll like the romantic part... That aside, you shouldn't try to make sense of anything. Likely, we're dead, and this the region of the afterlife reserved for scholars. If we were able to figure everything out, it wouldn't be fun anymore... it would be Hell." Burying her head in her hands, she said,

"I need another cup of coffee."

Horace pointed out that after midnight, the attendant that brews the coffee goes home - he knew there was a word for such a person, but could not think of it... a "Brewster," he thought. However, there is a vending machine in the room adjoining the computer lab on the second floor. He was afraid to open the door, in spite of the fact he could see through the machines through the glass panels separating the rooms. Lavinia grasped his hand firmly, and said,

"Don't you dare! That's the portal!"

"I know, but I want to try it! I mean, the worst that could happen is dying. You did it once."

“Yes, Horace! But I didn’t die. I might not be so lucky the next time.” He stood up from his chair, and said,

“I’m going with or without you this time. In case you decide to come with me, why not write a letter to your friend, ‘Dearest Lavinia’. I’ll place it inside this book, and reshell it. That way, if he comes back looking for you, he will not be waiting an eternity.”

Lavinia, suddenly faced with the prospect of losing her only friend, told Horace that they should enter the room together... at the same very moment. She included these details in her letter this gracious beau for which she had no recollection. Nevertheless, if she could be transported through time and space by a vending machine, she could fall in love with a man living in 1873... A man who visits truck stops in Idaho? At least, he was working on his doctorate. Now, that she put her mind to it, she puzzled over how she became a scholar in the first place.”

When they reached the door of the second floor concessions room in the library, Horace started to have second thoughts. The row of vending machines looked intimidating in an aspect that seemed monolithic. While he struggled with the decision to risk leaving the safety of the library, Lavinia sat down at a table and emptied her purse looking for money for the coffee machine. On opening her wallet, she happened to notice that for some reason her driver’s license and registration were issued by the State of North Carolina, not Georgia - she had never lived in North Carolina. Her photo showed a brunette with tiny wire-rim glasses, dressed in a lime green sweatshirt. It listed her home address as being in Rocky Mount. Her car registration listed a 1990, Japanese made, four-cylinder pickup, and the trademark on the keys appeared to match. She asked to look at the contents of Horace's wallet. After a moments glance, she gasped...

Horace's driver’s license was issued in 2008! His age was listed as 25 years, but the man looked closer to her age, 32 years, if not older; and the license was issued by the State of Idaho. She asked,

"When all of this started for you, what year was it?" He replied,

"It was 2011. What about you?" She looked down at both drivers’ licenses on the table,

"It was 2002."

Horace didn't think a person could return where you started, nor did he think you could meet yourself, or change the past.

“Like a stream, space-time bifurcates, and another history is created from that point: “You are going on with your life completely oblivious to your predicament of being here and knowing your counterpart doesn't know.”

Lavinia contemplated the irony: there really wasn't a main stem to it all, it only seemed that way from the observer's viewpoint. The main stem was nominal, the tangle of objective interactions curled in on themselves.

Lavinia swept her possessions back into her purse, rose from the table, and walked over to the door. She slowly turned the door handle. Horace followed her. The opened door revealed nothing more than a few concession machines, an institutional folding table, and a large trash can. Cautiously, they entered the room. Nothing had changed. Horace walked around the room, left it, returned, and then sat on the edge of the table. Nothing had changed. For Lavinia, there was a mix of relief and disappointment. She had exhausted her available resources at the library. The answers to why her world came to an end seemed to be a few months away – that is, hopefully, when the William Williams book was scheduled for release. She had a hunch – only a hunch – that it held the answers. Ironically, it was forever out of reach. On the other hand, the library loop had its advantages: when the clock jumped back from 2 A.M. to 6:21 P.M., refreshment came without having slept or had a meal other than the coffee shop offerings; the pressures and responsibilities of living were irrelevant; and finally, hanging out with Horace – turning their efforts towards knowledge for its own sake – was, lacking a better word, fun. A recurring loop of being caught in an avalanche and freezing to death under a ton of snow would be real hell. After dispelling that thought, looking at the coffee machine she asked,

"Want to try the cappuccino, Horace? I bet it's simply horrible."

The sign for Yonder Grill rose fifty feet above the horizon. It had red chaser lights, and a large arrow of yellow flashing lights pointing down. Bert took the exit. He was suddenly blinded. He hit the brakes, and skidded off the road. When his eyes adjusted, he was so completely dazed by the sight before him, he started babbling aloud, "I am dead? Right?" Over and over, he repeated these words like a mantra. A tall, skinny fellow with a cowboy hat approached him out of the glaring disk of the mid-morning sun. Behind him, there was a mob of figures closing in on him. They were cheering and waving their hats. By the time the spots cleared from his vision, the tall guy had opened Bert's door and was offering an outstretched hand,

"Howdy, Friend! You've got Georgia plates. Born and raised there?" Bert responded,

"No, North Carolina... Am I dead?"

The tall trucker almost pulled Bert out of the car with his handshake. When Bert gained his balance, the trucker slapped him on the shoulder, and said,

“Allow me to introduce myself. The name is “Slim” Williams, that is, uh; Colonel “Slim” William Williams, USMC, and these are my boys. Yes, we’re called Williams’ Raiders!” Williams turned to his men and said,

“I was right, boys! He’s one of us! Now, don’t crowd him. Give him some air.” In a weak voice, Bert muttered,

“Where are we?” Col. Williams laugh, and said,

“Why, this is the Petersburg Road.” This was just too much for Bert to handle. Everything then when black.

When Bert opened his eyes there he was, Col. Williams. The giant man laughed heartily, then asked,

“Heat get to ya, partner?”

Bert was resting on his back in the trailer with a smoked ham for a pillow. Bert once again asked where he was. Williams reached into a cooler inside the trailer, and pulled out an ice-cold can of beer. He popped the tab, and put the can in Bert’s hand, and said,

“Before you think about getting up on your feet, I think you ought to drink that. We need to go over a few things. Now, I can’t explain why we are here. But we’re here.”

The aroma of roasting pork outside filled the trailer. Bert sat up. For the first time, he had a chance to size up Williams. He was tall, surely over six feet and a half, and thin. His cowboy boots and hat were decorated with silver and turquoise ornaments – definitely, handmade southwest Indian. The belt buckle holding up his jeans and the buttons for his leather vest were also silver.

“Our mission, for the time being,” Williams continued, “is to keep the flow of provisions moving up the line to Liege. We meet the train here, and unload.”

“I don’t understand this,” Bert interjected. “Liege is in Belgium! How do you figure getting there from Petersburg? If this is Petersburg, Virginia? It sure doesn’t look like it to me! You are going to have to explain more than that! I find myself not only driving in the wrong direction; it’s a couple thousand miles west. In spite of all that, I knew how to get home from there. Then, you come along!”

Williams shook his head, and looked at Bert. A blast of a train whistle could be heard in the distance. Williams announced ebulliently,

“Shake a leg, old friend. The train is here!”

He jumped down from the trailer, and motioned Bert to hurry along. Up the track, Bert saw a thick column of smoke belching from a steam locomotive. Williams backed his rig up alongside the tracks. In the noonday light, Bert saw men dressed in

the uniforms of soldiers mounted on horseback. United States Army Cavalry uniforms from the late nineteen century? What kind of war re-enactment was this? Bert, puzzled, asked,

“Aren’t those guys supposed to be real fanatics about accuracy? Those aren’t the right uniforms! Shouldn’t all this be taking place where it actually happened, not somewhere in Idaho?” Williams answered,

“You work with what you’ve got, buddy-boy,”

The train squealed, and rumbled as it came to a stop. The locomotive was a Norris 4-4-0, and the date on the front of the boiler was 1853. Now, here was something authentic! The soldiers dismounted, and proceeded to unload the provisions from the truck. The brakemen on the train came down from their perches, and opened the box cars. Bert walked alongside the train, looking inside. The soldiers greeted him with gestures of friendship, and called him “Major.” Bert, at this point, was convinced he was having the granddaddy of hallucinations. Even so, this “trip” was getting interesting. One box car contains something very curious – if the sight of World War One reenactors unloading the contents of a supermarket meat department from semi wasn’t strange enough. This box car contained vending machines. Bert asked one of the soldiers why they needed them. His answer was,

“Special orders... they’ll be dispatched forward.”

After about half an hour watching this strange sight, the engineer asked Bert if he’d like to ride in the cab. Never having ridden in a steam locomotive, Bert became excited about the idea of riding with the crew. He asked whether the assembly area was a safe place to leave his car, and how long would it be before the train returned. The engineer replied that nobody would mess with his carriage out here, not with Colonel Williams in charge. The train would be back around dark. After experiencing sudden daylight, Bert wondered why he bothered to ask. Nevertheless, be he dead or simply gone mad, it seemed like all this craziness was more interesting than going to a conference in Baltimore. So, riding in the cab of an antique locomotive, Bert began his journey into a particular history of the early days of the First World War. A history that included battlefield concession machines.

Lavinia flattened the dollar bill, then fed it into the library’s coffee machine. It immediately rejected it. On the second try, however, it took. She had to push two buttons for her selection; the first determined the strength of the coffee, and the second, the blend. After a slight pause, the machine started to vibrate, and a tiny cup dropped down into the dispensing arms behind a sliding plastic window... THEN,

Before Lavinia and Horace was an endless horizon of rolling prairieland with not a single tree in sight. The two stood looking out over the vast expanse. Behind them,

parked a few yards away, was a 1912 Stoddard Dayton Coupe. Horace was dressed for driving in boots, plaid vest, linen duster, leather cap, and goggles protecting his eyes. Also dressed for a drive, Lavinia wore a cotton duster over her walking skirt, and a touring hat protected by a light cloth covering tied beneath her chin. She, too, had goggles – hers resting on her forehead. Both wore leather riding gloves. Lavinia, looking forward, without turning her gaze to Horace, said,

“My-my, it appears we have landed in the middle of nowhere.”

“Yes, this looks like nowhere. That’s called shortgrass... my guess is western Dakotas; maybe Montana.” Looking at her probingly, he continued, “With that hat covering your hair, your face looks exactly the same. How do you like our car?” She asked,

“Do you know how to start it?”

“No.”

“Key on, gas lever on, spark up, hit the choke a tad while you crank. Once it starts, spark down, and give it gas – at least, that is how I recall it is done with a Model A... more or less. That is, after we figure out where we are going. Something in the back of my mind tells me that I packed a basket for us. Why not fetch it?”

“Remember starting a Model A? Hmm... Been here before, I suppose? What year is it?” Looking at Horace, she exclaimed in a befuddled tone,

“Good Lord, Horace, I don’t know! By the looks of things, I think it is sometime after the turn of the century – the twentieth, that is; the teens are more like it! Not to say it isn’t a pleasant change to be out of doors. It is! The sky is beautiful, the sun and breeze excite every nerve, and I can smell this grass... and these gloves.” She brings her gloves up to her nose and takes a deep whiff of the leather’s aroma. Seamlessly, without a microsecond’s transition, Lavinia and Horace found themselves elsewhere.

Suddenly, they found themselves back in the library, the coffee machine gurgling and sputtering as the paper cup finally filled. Before they had a chance to breathe, they were standing in front of the sputtering coffee machine at the rest area at Rocky Mount. Lavinia, once again on solid earth, was not in Edwardian garb. Instead, she wore a brown jacket, white tank top, and jeans. Her long dark hair was pulled back in a ponytail. When she saw Horace, she let out a scream. He was a lanky, baby-faced teen in a red baseball cap!

"Was this the man who just... just what, a hundred years ago.... Oh-no!" she thought.

Her scream roused the migrants sleeping on the ground. The coffee machine stopped sputtering, and made a loud thump. They were returned to the 1910s, snowbound in an elegant hotel room somewhere in the American Northwest.

After a brief conniption prompted by the discovery of a wedding ring on her hand, Lavinia surrendered to utter exhaustion. Free of the library loop, she experienced after what might have been an eternity, the need to sleep. Having shed all of her layers of clothing, and slipped into a nightgown, she crawled under the covers, and fell dead to the world. Horace, once again contemporary in age to his slumbering companion, slept in a chair intermittently. Studying papers he had found in their trunks by the dim electric lamp, he frequently felt the need to close his eyes for brief periods that turned into hours. It was tending the coal stove, however, which kept him up. Daylight entered their room through the windows as a dull, washed out, gloom, and remained so the whole day as the bad weather persisted. From time to time, Horace would gaze out the frosty panes to learn more of the unknown city of the northwest. He observed a haze of coal smoke hovering above snow covered streets, not quite above the rooftops. It had not occurred to him that commercial buildings of the time - the ubiquitous brick boxes of "Main Street" - had so many chimneys. He had only known them as artifacts preserved in historic districts, renovated, with central heating and air conditioning. So this was the real "Edwardian Era" urban landscape: relics of the nineteenth century American commercial architecture, renovated with modern features such as steam heat and indoor plumbing; soon to be torn down, and replaced by department stores, or hotels of ten stories or more; thereafter, to become seedy flophouses, or abandoned; then, prized office space, upscale studio apartments, and boutiques by century's end. It never occurred to him that this smoke stain mix of squat brick structures, wooden out buildings, and cluttered alleys were "Main Street" before the quaint, uniformity of "Main Street." Historic districts were something of a genteel fraud, he mused. Lavinia, on the other hand, Horace suspected, was from this age, and found herself thrown forward to the library. She seemed to fit too well into this time. But why, in establishing their relationship in the library, was this important fact left out; or was it?

"She wasn't uprooted from her time, she died!" he whispered.

Was he dead, too? He didn't think so, but it could have happened so suddenly that he did not know it. He recalled vividly his life as a student in 2011, but the library of eternity was not his university library; and it didn't look that way during his undergraduate years in 2002. It was he that was afraid to use the coffee machine, not her; and now, she appeared more content with the times than the comforts of twenty-first century life.

The papers in the trunks appear to confirm that they were living in 1914 – obviously, the winter months. They also appeared to have been married for years. Considering the awkwardness of living in a foreign time, Horace reluctantly admitted to himself that being married to Lavinia seemed more like a prerequisite for existence - like breathing - than prerogative. It was quite possible that they were the only two beings in this time that had ventured there from not only another time - perhaps,

indirectly, from different times. He liked her, but loving her was too dangerous. Like the letter writer, Bert Fowler, he might become separated from her forever in an infinity of worlds. That was worse than death! Lavinia stirred briefly around daybreak, and fell back to sleep. Sitting at her bedside for a while, Horace was pleased to find that their ages appeared to have aligned when they returned to this particular past. His age was variable; her age was constant. What did that mean?

When Lavinia awoke, she said,

“We’re still here, Horace!” He replied,

“Yes, it is 1914, from what I gather. There is nothing in our papers that gives a slightest hint about our place in the world. The good news is that we appear to be well-off.” Lavinia cast off the covers, and placed her bare feet on the floor.

“Horace! It is frigid in here! Can’t you do better with that stove? Where are my spectacles?” Horace took her glasses from a table near the window, then handed them to her. After gathering her hair behind her head, she put them on. Looking intensely at Horace, she asked in a somewhat offended tone,

“Why did you not sleep beside me last night?” Startled, he asked,

“Do you want that?”

“No... Nevertheless, if our present situation acquires the semblance of a protracted life, that cannot go on. If you neglect me, I’ll grow resentful, and make your life miserable. The hundred years between us is only a minor consideration... we’re the same age here! Besides, if this were to suddenly end...” Before she could finish her sentence, they were returned to the second story concession room of the library. Lavinia, staring at the cup of coffee behind its glass shield in the machine muttered,

“Damn... I should have known! Just when I was starting to enjoy living again.” After eyeing the coffee for a moment, she removed the cup from the machine, and took a sip. Turning to Horace, she said,

“At least, it is still hot... Ready for another cup?”

“Before we do that, let’s check your mail drop. Maybe, your friend left an instruction manual for this infernal contraption. You know, there is something that came to my mind when we were out on our little adventure. Back then is where you came from, and that is where you belong. You are your great-grandmother Lavinia, is that not so?” After taking another sip of her coffee, she said,

“So, Mr. Know-it-all, explain why I was living in Rocky Mount, North Carolina in 2002? What is this business about 1883, and 1873, or 1973? Do I belong in those

times, too? By the way, do you have any great ideas about saving me from avalanches, should the problem present itself again?” Shaking his head, he asked,

“When did that happen?” Lavinia finished the last of her coffee, and threw the paper cup into the trash.

“We’re coming up to a rough spot, Major,” said the engineer. “Around the bend, and straight on, is the bridge at Gaston – a long one, too. Having gone around Petersburg, the tracks turn south to Hicksford, we have only to make it safely across the Roanoke. The next town on the line, if all goes well, is Châlons-sur-Marne, then head north to Reims. From there, to Charleville-Mézières. Did the Colonel get you straight on reprograming those machines when we get there?” Bert asked,

“Yes, I have it all written down... There are a few things that have me puzzled, my friend. I’m sure, the last time I checked, that if you cross south over the Roanoke coming from Petersburg you end up in North Carolina; and turning north will take you back to Petersburg.” The engineer laughed, then said,

“Generally, that’s what happens. But Colonel Williams found a shortcut.”

“A shortcut across the Atlantic?”

“Yeah, imagine that! I am not sure of the particulars, but it works most of the time. This railroad, for example, is a branch line of the Petersburg Railroad called the Greensville & Roanoke. It does not exist anymore. The next town, Gaston – Old Gaston, that is – disappeared under Roanoke Rapids Lake when they built the dam. That is the tricky part. We have to get over that bridge before the clock changes back to Standard Coil Time. It is like Russian roulette, because it happens about every eight hours, but little changes in its cycle – I mean tiny shifts relative to our time – make a big difference. Even though, we are going linearly, we’re leapfrogging in space-time.” Bert looking out at the passing landscape, now densely covered with pines, said,

“That sounds like a mathematical catastrophe: a little deviation in input leads to a radical chance in output. Yet, you don’t have to be jumping around for that to happen. It makes it more likely to happen more often if the output part of the system is unstable – like playing Russian roulette with a dozen revolvers on a rotating turntable.”

“The worse-case consequences are something like that, Major; that is, we are constantly resetting our position proximate to unforeseen disaster; unlike ordinary life, where risks are measurable probabilities. Think multiple layers of risk – 1858 North Carolina spliced to 1914 France with Roanoke Rapids Lake lurking somewhere underneath. Very risky, indeed; whereas, the same position in time and space never carries interdimensional multivariate probabilities of risk.”

“I presume, in your version of Virginia, entertaining anxieties about disappearing second derivatives doesn’t keep you up at night?”

“Not at all, sir. Personally, it gives me something of an adrenaline rush. When you sidestep the lightning bolt, it is a heady feeling. Here we go, sir! The bridge is there! At our present rate of speed, the last car will clear the southern abutment in three minutes. Since our trip has consumed three hours, fourteen minutes, and thirty-seconds, hitherto – give or take a few minutes – we have at maximum the remainder of eight hours, minus the unknown differential in alignment, plus or minus an unknown offset to compensate for drift in Standard Coil Time in its periodic retrograde cycle. Contrariwise, our window of opportunity could close any time without warning, and the bridge would disappear under the lake, save the relic of a few stone piers. It would make for an interesting train wreck, I must say.” Bert marveled at this statement as the locomotive crossed the northern abutment of the bridge. The Roanoke looked different without the man-made lake. He said,

“Tell me, what does the Colonel hope to achieve by getting involved with the Battle of Liege?” The engineer, somewhat puzzled, replied,

“You should know, sir. Every one of us is here by chance. Colonel Williams arrived here from the future, the year 2034. If you recall what happened the last time we tried to stop the war, we cross the bridge, and missed our portal. Surely, you recall?”

“No, I don’t! I was born in 1943. I’ve been a geology professor for the last nineteen years – starting in 1982 – and to retire in 2005. If I engaged in your enterprise prior to that, living appears to have clouded my memory. So, what were we up to before I was born?”

“Hot damn, Major! The locomotive made it over! Would you look at that! Excuse my outburst, sir... That last time you were here, you came from 2002; but, that was by way of 1883.”

“What are saying? Today is January 6, 2001!”

“I am sorry to have to disagree with you, sir. As long as we are on this bridge, it is March 23, 1858. We stole this locomotive from the Petersburg Railroad a few hours before, on July 8, 1862 – same as the last time. In a few minutes, we will be in Châlons-sur-Marne. You volunteer for our outfit – next year, for you – and we agreed to help rescue your wife. She was buried in an avalanche.”

“Wife? I have a wife?” The engineer laughed, and slapped Bert on the back.

“Yes, Major! She is a pretty little thing, too! Her name is Lavinia. The poor girl happened upon one of those old model portals – the ones in the drink machines that you have to open the door and pull out the glass bottle. See, it all works on spin,

hadrons, strings, and what not. Ask the Colonel. I can't figure it, because these vending machines – like those in the boxcars – are merely control interface panels for the real machines in another dimension. Colonel Williams can tell you all about them – he's from the future, like I said." Impatiently, Bert, what about Lavinia? I knew a Lavinia; but I never married her."

"But you would have, if she wasn't covered by an avalanche."

"When did that happen?"

"September 4, 1618... And I tell you, no sooner had we pulled her free – nearly frozen to death – she gets snatched to 1883. But if it is January, 2001, by your clock, it hasn't happened yet. See, everything has already happen – it's all over. Keeping on the move keeps things interesting. I don't know whether you married Lavinia in 1883 or 1914. I suppose the former."

"How did she get to 1914?"

"I don't know, sir! She's your wife. We're coming up on a marker. What does it say?" Bert leaned out the cab of the locomotive to take a better look. As the train passed the sign, he said,

"Sainte-Menehould... Where is that?" The engineer signaled the brakemen, then applied the brakes on the locomotive. Turning to Bert, he said,

"Son-of-a-bitch, we overshot! We're on our way to Verdun! The German Fourth Army is due south of us!" As soon as the locomotive came to a stop, Colonel Williams jumped down from the flatcar. He, followed by several horse soldiers who had also been riding on the car, walk to the cab. William called out,

"Back to the bridge, full steam! We can't be here!" Bert asked,

"Is it 1914?" William answered,

"We can't afford to stay here and find out! Let's go!" The engineer spied a light in the distance. He cried out,

"Train coming our way, sir!" Quickly, he threw the train in reverse. Williams, and his men scrambled onto the moving flatcar. As the old locomotive struggled to gather speed the oncoming train race out of the horizon. A high pitch whistle streaked, echoing through the landscape followed by the squeal of brakes being applied. A cloud of steam rose bellow rushed out into the trees. The engineer of the old Norris screamed,

"It is a monster!" Frantically, the fireman fed wood into the fire box. Even so, the locomotive struggled as giant, executing an emergency stop, advanced. Within a quarter of a mile, the French locomotive screamed to a full stop. It receded from view

as the old Norris gathered speed, running backward to a bridge that may, or may not be there. Luckily, it was. The engineer turned to Bert, and said,

“I don’t know a lot about French locomotives, Major, but that was bigger than any that I’ve ever seen! Though, I can say for sure, we arrived a little late – maybe, a couple of decades.” Wiping the sweat from his brow, and speaking breathlessly, Bert said,

“You still haven’t told me why you fellows want to get involved with World War One.” The engineer replied,

“Outside of the fact that we can, this is our chance to do something that is morally right of our own free will. We can’t stop the Germans, but we can save lives. There are some special people out there – all wounded, and some will die. I don’t know who they are, but they save thousands during their lives. We have the technology to save them. Aside from that, we have provisions for the refugees. You should know all this, but I see that the trip here dulled your memory, sir.”

A clamor arose from the brakemen on the cars, followed by the horse soldiers riding on the flat cars.

“Stop! Stop! Go back! It’s the Rebs!” Applying the brakes, the engineer exclaimed,

“Good Lord, no!” On the north side of the bridge, a detachment of Confederate soldiers waited with rifles drawn to retrieve their train. The Norris came to a stop midway on the bridge, then struggled to creep forward to France. Seeing this, the Confederates charged onto the bridge. Then, they started firing.

The locomotive shuttered to a stop with a terrific clank. The horse soldiers jumped from the flat car, then dashed past the locomotive. The brakemen soon followed. The engineer vented the boiler to cloak the escape, then yelled,

“Let’s run for it!”

Bert and the crew of the engine set off running in the direction of France! When they cross the abutment, however, France was no longer there!

When Horace retrieved the book from the stacks, he found a new letter! Like the first, it was dated Saturday, January 6, 1883. It was as he thought: Lavinia’s gentleman admirer described the events he had experienced in detail. Anxiously, Lavinia read it aloud. He concluded his narrative with the statement.

“Colonel Williams died, apparently swept away, along with a locomotive, when a bridge dissolved under our feet. There were no surviving witnesses, and the locomotive, its crew, and Williams were never found. Supposedly, all buried in the river bed under silt. Having been swiftly spirited out of peril before reaching the

French bank of the Roanoke, I was placed in my current time, in Savannah. There we were reunited briefly. I was pleased to learn that Horace is with you.” Lavinia was shocked! Horace gasped, then said,

“When was that? How does he know me?” She interjected,

“Here! We have more instructions. It says, ‘User Name: COLONEL_SLIM’ and ‘8-Liege_17’ is the password.” Horace said,

“Oh, come on, that’s not much of a password.”

“Hush, Horace! We already know this library is merely a store front for something else far beyond our comprehension. He continues by saying that if we open the program called ‘Master Clock,’ then in the text box type ‘EarthSubClassN-A24-INF,’ then, we will be prompted to create a new partition. It needs to be called ‘Eastern_North_Carolina_Continuous_Reality_Development_Zone.’ It will be completely isolated from temporal and spatial discontinuity. Type ‘071519731548 in the clock reset, then ENTER.’ After closing the program, he wants us to get a cup of coffee. Supposedly, this will bring us back to our restore point. Our artifact selves will continue in their respective periods, and at their present ages of life.” Horace, somewhat doubtful, paced about. Walking over to a computer terminal, he stood silent for a moment, then asked,

“You’re going to do this, am I right?” Lavinia replied,

“Of course, and you’re going with me.”

“You are demanding. With all due respect, I’m hoping that he is married to you this time.” Lavinia gives him a “go to Hell” smile, then points to the wall clock.

“Get to work, Horace. We have twenty minutes.” Looking at her with an exasperated expression, he said,

“So, you really want to return to 1914?” She replied,

“Cheer up, Horace, if we’re not married, you’ll still have a nice automobile.”

July 15, 1973. The clouds were closing in quickly – a dark, deep, charcoal gray mass that advanced quickly from the northwest. Horace raced ahead, with Sophie not more than a bike length behind. Her blond ponytail waving with every stroke of the pedals. Not far behind, Lavinia and Bert tried to keep up. Carrying most of the gear, they struggled against the gusts, now growing cooler as the front advanced. Still, droplets of perspiration rolled off Lavinia’s forehead, and streamed down the lenses of her tiny wire rims. The shirt she was wearing, the white dress shirt that she insisted that Bert pack “just in case,” she had appropriated for herself when she ran out of fresh clothing. Roll up to the elbows, and unbuttoned, it fluttered behind her. Beneath

it, she wore her bikini top and a short necklace of colored wooden beads. Other than that, her “stylish outfit” would have been incomplete without the patched jeans she had inhabited for three days. She was twenty-six years old, and thoroughly enveloped with bliss.

Bert had shed his years, and shirt. As for the latter, his lady friend, always claiming a chill, borrowed one after another during the week until he had to ration them for when they went out on the town. But at thirty, he was a fine specimen, a cross country biker and part-time carpenter’s helper. He was fit, firm, and broad shouldered, and Lavinia slyly rendered him perpetually shirtless evermore often as the week progressed because she enjoyed it. All four of them had deep tans, but Bert was the darkest.

A bright flash of lightning streaked from the sky; and within less than a minute, pellets of hail began to fall. Lavinia, undaunted by threw up her arms momentary and started to coast,

“Bert, this is the coolest thing! Don’t you want to do this all summer?” Horace called out,

“Hey, guys! We’re in the clear.” Ahead, there were three lengths of sixty-inch wide concrete pipe off the side of the road, placed on the grass beside a huge trench. They managed to park their bikes in one, and scramble inside another with their backpacks, then the storm let loose its torrents. Horace set up his old Sterno stove, and started cooking a meal of beans and franks. Always well-prepared, he doled out the prized stainless steel forks, spoons, and metal cups that he jealously guarded. After this ample dinner, Lavinia huddle up with Bert to listen to Horace expound on time and space – a display of mental agility that his companions unanimously agreed was crap. Nevertheless, they listen politely. All the while he was speaking, Sophie sat close to him, rubbing his chest – all in an effort to divert his mind to more pleasurable activities. For a while, his expansive thought held the high ground.

“A recursive residual temporal artifact constitutes a functional unit in continuous coil space-time. For those living in universes where 4-dimensional space-time is functioning properly at the molecular scale, these terms might seem obscure. Even so, the conditions of an existence of a place where corporeal beings never age or die – living without want – and free to pursue what they find fulfilling, is a common element of many religious belief systems. We need only recall the Elysian Fields, Nirvana, Valhalla, and Heaven, to name a few. In coil time, one attains perpetual life because the time schema is such that time moves a short duration, then loops back in forward motion at a right angle to the direction of time, never actually reversing or returning to the same starting point. Time here, extends crosswise into and through parallel universes that are essentially similar, with slight variations. With the perfect time machine, the necessary backward-looping direction could be adjusted to occur at

a speed of one hour to a sixteenth of a second for maximum physical and mental comfort.” Sophie interjected,

“Come on, Booboo! You’ve been talking about this far out idea you dreamed up ever since we camped out at Oregon Inlet. I told you not to try those mushrooms.” Frowning, Horace said,

“Don’t call me Booboo... at least, not in mixed company.”

“Well, don’t you think it is about time we say good night to our company, and let them settle into their cozy little love nest... Booboo?” Turning to Lavinia, she said in her lyrical Charleston accent,

“You two are not going to make too much noise, are you, sweet-thing? Sound carries out in the middle of nowhere, if you’ve noticed.”

Lavinia and Bert were married in September of that year. In this version of their history, Bert never finished his PhD in Geology. He accepted a job offer from an oil company. Shortly, after suffering a stroke in 2008, he succumbed to a heart attack, his third. Lavinia was killed in a car accident in 1979. Her car stalled on I-95 near Rocky Mount, North Carolina. As she was getting out of the car, she was hit by an eighteen wheeler. Bert never remarried.

Sophie tired of Horace. After changing majors to economics, she when to work for a Wall Street firm after earning a doctorate in the field. Eventually, she started her own hedge fund. In 2010, Sophie drown in a rip current off the coast of North Carolina. Ironically, she was a top-notch swimmer and marathon runner at her age.

So, “all works out for the best,” say the pathological optimists. Right? This brings us to Dr. Horace Fillyaw Pratt, physicist. A lifelong bachelor, Horace enjoyed unprecedented success during his career in the area of applied research in particle physics. In the late 2020s, his former graduate assistant and protégé, an ex-Marine named Dr. William Williams, joined him in developing a device for harnessing the enormous forces that held fundamental particles together, the strong nuclear force. By 2034, with Horace a few months shy of his ninetieth birthday, their labor yielded results. Instead of building a source of limitless power, they invented the time machine... and put it to use – undermining the orderliness of cause and effect in the world.

Colonel Williams did not die when the Roanoke Bridge disappeared from under his feet... It was one of the advantages of having ruined the world. True to the spirit of “The Corps,” he didn’t let a little thing like death get in the way of his mission. So, it goes... They’ll have to try again.